

As temperatures drop, cold weather pet safety can be a serious concern, even if many dogs (and cats) seem to enjoy frolicking, digging, and sniffing around in the snow. Pets aren't as aware of cold weather limits. So, it's important for pet owners to take precautions for dogs and cats in winter and watch for warning signs.

COMMON COLD WEATHER PET DANGERS

Watch out for common cold weather pet medical emergencies experienced by cats and dogs in winter. Most are preventable with proper care.

HYPOTHERMIA IN PETS

Even when it's above freezing, pets' extremities (including paws, noses, and ears) are especially susceptible to wind chill. This makes hypothermia one of the most common issues caused by frosty weather.

As in humans, hypothermia in pets results from low body temperature caused by extreme cold. The combination of wet fur and cold weather can be dangerous to dogs and cats and contribute to hypothermia. Other causes of hypothermia in pets include submersion in cold water for an extended period of time, as well as shock.

A **dog's normal body temperature** should be between 101°F and 102.5°F, while **the normal temperature for cats** ranges from 100°F to 102.5°F. However, temperatures can vary depending on the pet's age and other factors. Although temperatures below normal can be considered as hypothermia, generally temperatures below 99°F are more concerning. Symptoms of hypothermia in cats and dogs include paleness of skin, shivering, and listlessness to the point of lethargy. When sustained for too long, hypothermia can be fatal, leading to coma, heart failure, and other organ shutdowns.

As soon as you suspect that your pet has hypothermia, try to keep them warm by wrapping them in warm blankets. You can also place a wrapped heating pad or hot water bottle near your pet to increase body temperature. Just make sure it's not too hot and that it's not directly on the skin to avoid the risk of burns. Rubbing dry can help if the pet is just wet. However, if you think frostbite is a concern, rubbing the area with a towel can damage tissues.

Check your pet's temperature every 10 minutes. If it is consistently below 98°F (36.7°C), seek immediate **emergency veterinary attention**. Once it's above 100°F, remove the hot water bottle to avoid overheating.

FROSTBITE IN PETS

Frostbite is tissue damage that occurs due to the cold. In pets, it can vary from mild to severe and primarily occurs on the tips of your pet's tail, ears, and toes. Severity depends on the pet's size, age, fur thickness, and how long they've been in the cold.

Frostbite and hypothermia often go hand-in-hand (or paw-in-paw). Frostbite isn't as commonly life-threatening as hypothermia, unless it goes septic due to infection.

For cats and dogs in winter, a telling sign of frostbite involves **pale skin**. Watch out for a bluish-white hue, which is a sign of restricted blood flow. When skin is exposed to extreme cold, the body restricts blood flow to keep only the essential organs functioning.

Ice can also form on frostbite-affected areas, and the skin is often cold or brittle to the touch.

For cold weather pet safety, watch out for these symptoms of frostbite in dogs and cats, in increasing degrees of severity:

- **First degree:** Pale, hard skin at the extremities that turns scaly, red, and swollen when warmed
- **Second degree:** Blistering on the skin
- **Third degree:** Skin darkening, which may occur over a period of several days; formation of gangrene

If you suspect you have a pet with frostbite, keep the pet warm in the same way as treating cats and dogs in winter for hypothermia. **Just remember not to warm your pet directly from a heat source.** Pat the frostbitten area with a warm, dry towel. Do not massage or rub, as this will cause pain and may cause tissue damage. Contact us for **emergency veterinary attention** if you suspect severe frostbite.

POISONING IN PETS, INCLUDING ANTIFREEZE POISONING AND POISONING FROM OTHER CHEMICALS

Antifreeze, rock salt, or chemicals (such as ice melt) are often used to keep cars running and to melt snow for easier navigation of wintery sidewalks, driveways, and roads. However, antifreeze can contain ethylene glycol, a substance that is sweet to the taste but poisonous to pets.

Symptoms of antifreeze poisoning in pets include “drunken” behavior, such as nausea/vomiting and wobbly walking, which can escalate to seizures and coma. Warning signs of salt ingestion include vomiting, diarrhea, lethargy, not eating, excessive thirst and/or urination, incoordination, tremors and seizures. If you’ve observed these poisoning symptoms or suspect your pet has ingested antifreeze, contact your vet immediately — the sooner, the better.

PRECAUTIONS TO TAKE FOR COLD WEATHER PET SAFETY

LIMITING EXPOSURE TO COLD

It’s best to keep pets indoors where it’s warm as much as possible during the winter. Different animals have different tolerance levels. And, paws can get red and irritated with the cold, snow and ice. Of course, you can still take your pets out for walks. Just keep them shorter to prevent cold weather illnesses like hypothermia and frostbite.

Remember that thick fur coats give pets additional protection against the cold. Rather than shaving pets as winter approaches, trim longer hair (especially around feet) to minimize clinging snow, ice, and chemicals.

When you're out, consider dressing your pet in booties and a sweater or jacket to keep their feet and fur clean, dry, and snow-free.

It's difficult to put a time frame on being outside. It can depend on the temperature, conditions, and what type of shelter a dog or cat may have. We suggest not having animals outside overnight in cold weather or unsupervised when you're not home. If pets are outside in cold weather, even for an hour, have an option for shelter. Also, make sure pets have access to water that can't be blocked by drifting snow and ice. Even cats that typically stay outdoors should be able to get inside someplace warm.

Remember that leaving a pet in a car during winter can be just as dangerous as in the heat of summer. Temperatures can quickly reach unhealthy levels. Rather than leaving a pet in the car alone in cold weather, consider curbside delivery, bring a passenger, or leave your pet at home when possible.

Signs of a pet being outside too long in the cold can include red or irritated paws, paws that have started to bleed because ice has gotten stuck between toes, shaking/shivering, lethargy, pale or blue gums/tongue, and fur or skin that is cold to touch. Contact us if you have concerns about these potential cold weather pet emergencies.

CHECK-IN, CHECKUP

If you're feeling cold outside, remember that your pet probably is, too. Since pets can't speak up if they're feeling bad, it's up to you to take notice. Every now and then, check your pet's paws for signs of cold weather damage or injuries. Also, take notice of any behavior changes, which could be symptoms of cold weather illnesses in your pets.

This may be a good time for a yearly veterinary checkup. Cold weather can worsen some medical conditions, such as arthritis or diabetes, especially in older pets. Also, remember that bathing too often can reduce natural skin oils and increase dryness or scaling which is a more common pet concern during winter.

PROTECTION FROM DANGEROUS SUBSTANCES

Pets can be mischievous, and that gets them into accidents. Due to the especially lethal nature of antifreeze for dogs and cats, consider using products that contain propylene glycol rather than ethylene glycol and be sure to clean up any spills right away, including checking for leaks under cars.

While on walks or outdoors, pets can step in ice and chemicals which can be irritating to skin and dangerous if ingested. Be sure to wipe or wash and dry your pet's paws (including between the toes), legs, and stomach after spending time outside. You can also use booties to protect paws from cold and chemicals.

In addition, be sure to check for pets around your car in winter, especially those that have recently been turned off. Cats, in particular, may take shelter on or near a car parked outside. Fireplaces and space heaters can also pose potential risks to pets in winter. Train your pets to stay away from heat sources, and never leave pets unattended near a fireplace.

FINAL THOUGHTS FOR COLD WEATHER PET SAFETY & PREVENTING WINTER PET EMERGENCIES

In the flurry of winter activity, take time to notice your pet. Just this small act can make all the difference for cold weather pet safety. By keeping your pet safe, happy, and warm, you've already fought half the battle when it comes to protecting your pet from the worst issues brought on by winter weather.